

Public: Use cannabis tax to boost social equity

By JACK FICHTER
Cape May Star and Wave

CAPE MAY — The state of New Jersey expects to collect hundreds of millions of dollars from taxing legal recreational cannabis sales. How should that money be used?

The state Cannabis Regulatory Commission (CRC) held a public meeting via Zoom to

solicit opinions from southern New Jersey residents on how the state should use the funds. The answer: social equity programs.

The findings will be presented to the state Legislature, CRC Commissioner Krista Nash said during a meeting March 16. She said the Legislature would provide an itemized list of the

investments and how those investments are intended to support and advance social equity.

Nash said the CRC's highest priority was to support social equity businesses — those owned by people who have lived in economically disadvantaged areas, meet a certain income level or who have had past cannabis con-

victions. Businesses owned by minorities, women and disabled veterans are also a high priority, Nash said.

Commissioner Charles Barker said the Cannabis Regulatory Enforcement and Marketplace Modernization Act (CREAMM), which legalized recreational marijuana, establishes a fund in which the majority of cannabis revenue will be deposited. At least 70 percent of all tax revenue from retail sales of cannabis items will go toward social equity investments in Impact Zones, he said.

"Impact Zones are supposed to represent and focus on socially and economically disadvantaged municipalities most harmed by the failed War on Drugs," Barker said, adding that tax revenue can also be used to provide direct financial assistance to qualified persons.

"This is yet another opportunity to reinvest in the

people and communities, especially Black and Brown people, in communities that continue to bear the brunt of the failed drug war," Barker said.

The CRC has established a social equity excise fee on personal use cannabis cultivators to add more revenue that can be used for social equity investments. The excise fee is one-third of 1 percent of the average retail price per ounce during the first nine months of legal sales. After nine months, the CRC can adjust the excise fee as the cost of cannabis changes, he said.

As an example, if the average price of an ounce of cannabis is \$300, the excise fee would be 99 cents, Barker said.

"States are generating hundreds of millions of dollars in cannabis tax revenue annually," he said. "California in fact generated, I believe, \$1 billion in tax revenue."

Barker said there are many ways to help provide social equity, such as improved health care, housing development, economic opportunities, investment funds, social services, professional development, youth services, educational programs and financial literacy.

He said New Jersey will have some of the lowest cannabis taxes in the nation. In California, more than \$100 million in cannabis tax revenue has been used to provide grants to community organizations that help those harmed by the failed War on Drugs, Barker said.

"They also created a \$100 million fund for municipalities to develop and further build out their local marketplaces," he said.

Barker said Colorado has contributed more than \$400 million in cannabis tax revenue to its public school systems.

During public comment, Rory Wood called for community outreach programs to educate "those who still think negatively about cannabis."

"There are a lot of areas that didn't opt in to have cannabis in their communities, yet some of those communities have been ravaged by the opioid crisis," he said. "I'm here to tell you that I've seen and heard lots of people kick their opioid addiction by way of cannabis."

Vedra Chandler, of Camden, suggested tax revenue be used for infrastructure improvements such as parks, roads, schools and libraries, things lost due to urban decay following the War on Drugs.

Willingboro resident Chris Goldstein said he did not want cannabis tax money going to the police. He said \$300 for an ounce of legal marijuana was too expensive. He suggested a price of \$150 to \$200 per ounce plus tax.

"That will get people like me to buy lots of regulated marijuana and that will get the taxes flowing," he said.

Goldstein said he wanted the tax money to go to small businesses and people but not corporations that are possibly attacked to Russia.

Solomon Middleton Williams, deputy director of the Newark Community Street Team (NCST), asked that cannabis tax revenue be allocated to community-based organizations that hire and train those who have been affected by the failed War on Drugs.

"At NCST, we have seen the benefits. Currently we have 72 employees who are all affected by this War on Drugs," Middleton Williams said. "These folks are gainfully employed."

He concurred with Goldstein that cannabis tax revenue should not go to law enforcement.

"If dollars are put into law enforcement, it will be a slap in the face to our community," Middleton Williams said. "The same system that has harmed, over-incarcerated, over-policed, taken lives away from families and separated families for way too long."

Scheril Murray Powell, an attorney in the agricultural and cannabis fields, said cannabis workers were deemed essential during the COVID pandemic, putting cannabis in the same category as food and pharmaceuticals.

She suggested some cannabis tax revenue be earmarked for child care credits for cannabis essential workers.

"I want to give other people the opportunity, especially young women, to participate in the industry," Murray Powell said. "I think the lack of child care can be a potential barrier for individuals' involvement in our industry and the learning opportunities."

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